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### Aristotle on Friendship

“Friend” is a term used loosely in today’s society. The fellow student or any familiar face can be considered a friend. Social Networking allows individuals to keep a tally of their “friends” and the numbers can reach into the thousands for one individual. Society now focuses on the quantity over the quality of friendship. While it is good to have a strong web of acquaintances and friends which can add to an individual’s happiness, in order to be truly happy one should maintain a few strong bonds with “true” friends, or “best friends”. Friendship allows for an emotional symbiosis which is mutually beneficial to both individuals. This sharing of ideas and emotions create a trust between two humans which, as an animal with a group mentality, is vital to our well being. Maintaining friendships of both the imperfect and perfect type is essential to a happy human life.

The thoughts of Aristotle coincide with the view that friendship is a necessary tool for human happiness. He sees friends as essential parts for the development and exercise of virtues.

The good man is self sufficing, but friends are desirable, if not actually necessary to him, as giving scope for the exercise of beneficent activities, not as conferring benefits upon him. Besides, man’s highest activities must be exercised not in isolation, but as a member of society, and such life lacks completeness if without friends. (Aristotle, *Ethics Handout*)

So, the good man is self sufficient in his own virtues, but friends exist in one’s life so that he may have the chance to exercise those virtues which he holds. While Aristotle says that friends are desirable rather than necessary, yet he goes on to point out that life lacks completeness without

friends. His ultimate goal is to find the relationship between virtuous activity and friendship but first he must establish the difference between goodwill and friendliness. Goodwill is merely the wanting what is good for the sake of another and this can be felt for a complete stranger.

Friendliness however is a reciprocal feeling; caring about another individual because there is an exchange of the feeling of goodwill towards each other. Aristotle defines friendship as: "To be friends, then, they must be mutually recognized as bearing goodwill and wishing well to each other for one of the aforesaid reasons" (Aristotle, *Ethics VIII*). The reasons mentioned are virtuousness, pleasure and advantage; so it seems that all types of friendship are built on the mutual wish for the wellness of the other. Aristotle then divides friendship into two types, perfect and imperfect, based on the selfishness of the rational behind wishing the other goodwill. The perfect type friends are the friendships based on virtuousness, but in order to understand the perfect type, the imperfect friends must first be explored.

Aristotle begins with the imperfection based in inequality. If the relationship is unequal, as between bosses and workers, and parents and children, a complication of respect is encountered. The reciprocity necessary for friends is lost for each party must limit what is revealed to the other for external reasons. "Friendship is a kind of exchange - equal between equals..." (Aristotle, *Ethics Handout*) If the persons are not equals and a chain of respect must be maintained between them, they cannot truly be friends. Even if they possess the same amount of character, the two parties will still face differing levels of moral development. The other two types of imperfect friendship are those based in pleasure or usefulness.

Therefore those who love for the sake of utility love for the sake of what is good for themselves, and those who love for the sake of pleasure do so for the sake of what is

pleasant to themselves, and not in so far as the other is the person loved but in so far as he is useful or pleasant. (Aristotle, *Ethics VIII*)

These types of friendships maintain the reciprocity of goodwill, but it is usually limited because both parties care about the well being of the other solely to see that their own benefits resulting from the relationship are not endangered. They do not care for the other just for the sake of the other's well being; instead, it is a selfish rational. These are the friends which are the temporal familiar faces associated through similar interests, location or mutual social circles. They can range from acquaintance to good friend based on their level of pleasure or usefulness and the amount of time spent together. Usually they enter only one aspect of an individual's life and that is all they share. These are the teammates, classmates, young lovers and people which one enjoys the company of, but with limited interaction. These relationships are easily made or lost and continuously change as an individual progresses through life. "Now the useful is not permanent but is always changing. Thus when the motive of the friendship is done away, the friendship is dissolved, inasmuch as it existed only for the ends in question" (Aristotle, *Ethics VIII*). As interests change, social circles do as well, and as an individual changes location, chances of interaction dwindle and the relationship fades. This is expected though by all human beings and while it can be slightly traumatic to lose a large amount of imperfect friends, during a move perhaps, over time they are easily replaced and new relationships are formed.

Aristotle then describes the perfect type of friendship, one based on virtuousness and character.

Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in virtue; for these wish well alike to each other qua good, and they are good themselves. Now those

who wish well to their friends for their sake are most truly friends; for they do this by reason of own nature and not incidentally; therefore their friendship lasts as long as they are good-and goodness is an enduring thing. (Aristotle, *Ethics VIII*)

These friends, Aristotle wants to argue, are the truest friends. Today, these relationships are known as *best* friends. Aristotle says that these rare relationships are formed between only those who are equally good. They have equal moral development and virtue. This relationship is considered perfect because it is the total package. Both parties are of equal virtue, they are useful to one another because they help the other exercise that virtue and they are pleasing to one another because the other's presence never ceases to improve the situation. Aristotle even goes so far as to say: "Those, however, who approve of each other but do not live together seem to be well-disposed rather than actual friends. For there is nothing so characteristic of friends as living together" (Aristotle, *Ethics VIII*)... The last part of that rationale is debatable. Best friends do not necessarily need to spend the majority of their time together nor do they need to have all of the same interests. They merely need a single common interest for the relationship to work. Instead, the pleasure of the relationship comes from the unique sense of trust formed between the two people. They do not necessarily need to physically be together all the time as long as they are there for the other when needed. The perfection of this friendship is found in the mutual love and respect for one another and the selfless wish for the other's well being. This creates a mutual emotional support and each individual's benefit is the comfort that no matter what, there is always someone who cares. Overall though, Aristotle is correct in posing that, "Perhaps they should look out for friends who, being pleasant, are also good, and good for them too; for so they will have all the characteristics that friends should have" (Aristotle, *Ethics VIII*).

Welcoming all of these friends into one's life comes at a cost. Caring about another human being can be difficult and even painful at times when the feelings are unequal, not returned or when conflicts arise. The Stoics view these external ties resulting only in suffering with little to no benefits. They believe friendship to only be possible once the external interests are removed. Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher, argues that if we see animals playing, we think they are friends. But it is not always the case because the goodwill they seem to express towards one another is extremely temporary. He says, "To see what friendship is, throw a piece of meat among them and you will learn" (Epictetus, *Discourses*). This is not saying that man should renounce friendship entirely, instead he must renounce the external interests which can destroy the reciprocal goodwill between friends and only then can friendship occur. So, under the Stoic philosophy, not only is friendship possible, but only for the Stoic is it possible. Those who continue to care about external affairs will never find friendship because they will continue to clash over said affairs. At the surface, this seems to eradicate the risk involved in friendship, but examined closer this seems to be more of an absence of ill-will rather than a mutual wish for goodwill. Also, the relationship could only develop so far if there are no common interests or opportunity to sympathize. An example of a Stoic friendship manifests itself in the relationship between two zombies in the movie *Warm Bodies*. Both zombies have a fully functional thought process, yet they are unable to communicate their thoughts and ideas due to their deteriorating bodies. So they just sit next to one another, occasionally grunting and thankful for a benign familiar face. This seems to be what a Stoic friendship would resemble. Occasional exchange of words and the comfort of not being completely alone, yet unable to connect on any deeper level because they are stuck inside their own heads.

Aristotelean ideal of friendship seems to make the most sense as it is based on mutual goodwill rather than mutual thought process, like the Stoics. This idea that helping others helps oneself is a major step towards achieving human happiness and friends allow that goodwill and virtue to be exercised. However, happiness is not only helping others but maintaining a healthy ego as well. This is the true function of friends in a happy human life. The perfect or best friends are essential because they bring out the best in each other, are pleasurable to be around and most importantly provide the emotional support and ego boost that everyone needs in life. Those few best friends who know each other better than anyone create a safe zone which allows a trust to form and happiness to flourish un-judged. The imperfect friends are essential as well. Their function is to improve each experience and add to each others interests in life. They help make work more fun or easier and even though they are exchanged throughout a lifetime, they can always be counted on to provide a familiar face.